

Submission on the Draft State Public Health Plan (SA) 2019-2024

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Healthy planet, **healthy people.**

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Background

Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) is an independent self-funded, non-government organisation of medical doctors and students in all Australian States and Territories. DEA works to address the diseases - local, national, and global - caused by damage to our natural environment. We are a public health voice in the sphere of environmental health with a primary focus on the health harms of pollution and climate change.

DEA's responses to the Draft State Public Health Plan

DEA is pleased to comment on the *Draft State Public Health Plan 2019-2024*. DEA also made submissions during the previous rounds of consultation, providing feedback on the *Summary Framework for Consultation: DRAFT State Public Health Plan 2019-2024* and during the review of the *State Public Health Plan 2013*.

Vision (p4)

DEA supports the Plan's vision for a healthy, liveable and connected community for all South Australians. In particular, DEA is pleased to see the Plan's vision for friendly, safe and sustainable communities in well-designed places.

It is disappointing that the health of the environment is not explicitly referenced as a key determinant of healthy, sustainable communities, however we take note of the vision for opportunities for active and public transport, and access to green space. To emphasise the importance of these factors to the health and wellbeing of South Australians, the Vision statement could be strengthened to read 'A healthy, liveable and connected community and environment for all South Australians' or similar.

DEA also commends the Plan's vision for a collaborative approach to improving health and wellbeing in South Australia. As per our previous submissions, DEA is willing to work with SA Health on further development of the Plan, particularly in relation to actions which consider the important interplay between the health of people and the environment.

Framework of the plan (p7)

We note further development of the Framework since the previous draft, and the removal of the two goals.

Vision – as per our previous submission, we encourage explicit reference to the environment as essential to a healthy community.

Priorities – we are pleased to see the inclusion of ‘Protect against public and environmental health risks and respond to climate change’, with ‘respond’ replacing ‘adapt’. However, we again advocate for climate change as an urgent, cross-cutting priority rather than a standalone issue relevant only to the ‘Protect’ banner. As well-documented in numerous peer-reviewed articles, the direct and indirect health impacts of climate change are already being experienced, globally and in Australia and South Australia with increasing frequency and severity. An urgent response is required if we are to address the negative health impacts of climate change and maximise the health co-benefits from acting now.

Action areas – the inclusion of ‘new and emerging priorities’ facilitates consideration of climate change and related health threats, which could be stated explicitly as an example.

Outcomes – as per our previous submission, the development of a sustainable, resilient health system is essential to support mitigation of climate change and its health impacts in South Australia. We encourage development of an additional outcome statement that considers these factors.

Public health is... (p8)

DEA is pleased to see climate change risk management planning included as one of several environmental public health activities. To emphasise the importance of the environment to human health and wellbeing, other potential examples include:

- Active and public transport
- Access to green space for mental and physical health
- Pollution and waste minimisation

There are multiple determinants of health (p12)

As stated in the draft Plan, our health and wellbeing are impacted by the social, economic and environmental conditions in which we live.

Unfortunately, the examples included on this page do not include any explicitly environmental factors, such as weather and climate or air quality, and thus an opportunity to educate readers about the range of determinants of health is missed.

The state of our health is not the same for everyone (p13)

DEA supports the focus on vulnerable groups, with these people (along with others such as children and older people) at greatest risk of health impacts of climate change and other determinants of environmental health.

Chronic disease and injury in South Australia (p14)

The burden of chronic disease and modifiable risk factors in South Australia is of concern and warrants specific discussion in the Plan. It is worth noting that climate change will exacerbate many chronic diseases, due to increasing heat stress, worsening air quality, and the effects of severe weather events, including effects on mental health. Also, important however are the health co-benefits of climate change mitigation; for example, increased use of active and public transport will encourage physical activity and help to tackle high rates of obesity and associated chronic disease.

Communicable (infectious) disease (p15)

While the impact of 'weather pattern changes' on zoonotic and vector borne diseases is noted on p16, there is no mention on p15 of the probable impact of climate change on the epidemiology of a wider range of communicable diseases, including food-borne diseases.

South Australians are protected every day where we live, work and play from public health risks (p16)

DEA is pleased to see the inclusion of zoonotic diseases as an example of public health protection activities, and particularly the acknowledgement of the influence of 'weather pattern changes' on disease risk. However, we suggest that the role of climate change is clearly stipulated, for example by changing the phrase to 'weather pattern changes due to climate change'.

DEA has noted, with concern, the increasing number of peer-reviewed articles describing associations between human health and activities such as fracking for coal seam gas. While further research is needed, these environmentally destructive activities are likely to contribute to ill-health in a number of areas. South Australians will expect protection from these public health risks, particularly in relation to a number of areas noted on this page: water safety and security, food safety and exposure to environmental hazards.

Regional public health planning 2013-2018 (p17-22)

DEA is pleased to read that environmental health and action on climate change are among the top five public health issues identified by South Australian councils. The significance of these issues for local governments again emphasises the importance of considering them as

cross-cutting issues relevant to all aspects of health system planning and activity.

Determinants of health (p23)

While this figure states that environmental factors are among the key determinants of health, examples in addition to 'water sanitation' would be useful elements to better to describe the range of environmental determinants, for example air quality and weather/climate.

Partnerships (p24)

DEA supports strong partnerships between health and other sector stakeholders, particularly with regard to cross-cutting issues such as climate change and environmental health.

Priority populations (p25)

DEA supports the public health approach to priority populations. Those listed in this document (along with other population groups, such as older people and young children) are particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change.

Priorities (p26)

DEA supports the 4 priorities – Promote, Protect, Prevent, Progress. However, it is important that environmental factors including climate change are considered across each of the four priorities, as cross-cutting rather than standalone issues.

Since the health system in Australia is estimated to contribute to around 7% of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions, we strongly encourage consideration of opportunities to make the health sector more sustainable, with 'greening' measures a key opportunity for the health sector to lead by example and promote sustainable, climate-resilient and future-proof actions in all facets of South Australian society. Experience from the NHS in the UK has shown substantial financial savings from taking such action.

Promote: Build stronger communities and healthier environments (p27)

DEA is pleased to see that the word 'environment' is now included in the sub-heading for this priority, and that environmental factors are given greater consideration in this section than in the previous Draft Framework.

Climate change should be included among the reasons why promoting healthier environments is important for human health. It is also an 'emerging issue' that requires ongoing research and the development of mitigation, adaptation and resilience strategies.

In addition to the health, social, emotional and economic benefits of local food systems, there are environmental benefits; for example, local production reduces 'food miles' and associated greenhouse gas emissions. DEA suggests that environmental benefits be included in the list describing the benefits of local food systems.

DEA is pleased that the actions under this priority include a range of environmental health considerations including those with co-benefits for health and the climate. Other opportunities include the promotion of 'greening' activities within the health sector, and education of community members about the health impacts of climate change and other environmental stressors.

Protect: Protect against public and environmental health risks and respond to climate change (p29)

As stated above, DEA is pleased that the subheading for this priority now states 'respond' rather than simply 'adapt' to climate change, as the term 'respond' implies a more pro-active approach including opportunities for mitigation.

However, again climate change should be addressed as a cross-cutting rather than standalone issue. For example, climate change is likely to be an important factor in the risk and transmission of zoonotic and other infectious diseases, however these issues are listed separately (p29), implying that there is no relationship between the two. An integrated approach is essential to effectively address climate change and its multitude of public health implications.

DEA is pleased that the Plan promotes application of a 'climate risk management lens' to all new plans, policies and strategies. However, this lens should be extended to include sustainability and opportunities for 'greening' and climate change mitigation at all levels.

Noting the proposed actions which include reducing exposure to harmful environmental contaminants, also critical is the protection of natural environments to ensure human health, including actions to protect biodiversity, air quality, and food and water security.

Prevent: Prevent chronic disease, communicable disease and injury (p31)

In addition to those risk factors listed, DEA suggests that the contribution of environmental factors to disease risk is explicitly stated (for example, air pollution and the risk of respiratory disorders; substandard housing/overcrowding and the risk of a range of communicable diseases; severe weather events and injuries/deaths). Indeed, addressing environmental factors offers a range of health co-benefits.

Additional areas of action could include promoting active and public transport and smart urban design strategies to increase physical activity and tackle obesity, and promoting healthy, local and sustainably-produced food to reduce risk of chronic conditions such as obesity and diabetes.

Progress: Strengthen the systems that support public health and wellbeing (p33)

DEA supports the focus on effective partnerships and the importance of an evidence-based approach to all public health issues, particularly emerging and cross-cutting issues such as climate change.

In line with climate change as a priority cross-cutting issue, the development of a sustainable and climate-resilient health system is a key opportunity for progress, with a “climate and health in all policies” approach across all health and other sector activities key to promoting environmental and human health.

Given the increasing public health risks posed by climate change, DEA supports workforce capacity-building that acknowledges such risks and incorporates strategies to increase knowledge of climate impacts and climate resilience, among both health sector staff and the broader community.

Monitoring and reporting (p35)

Given the significance of climate change and other environmental factors to public health in South Australia, monitoring and reporting processes must include indicators of mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change. The development of indicators for health system sustainability is also encouraged.

Implementation and governance (p36)

DEA is pleased that implementation of this Plan will be a collaborative approach led by the Department of Health and Wellbeing. A comprehensive strategy for resourcing the *State Public Health Plan 2019-2024* will of course be critical. As per our previous submission, the Plan requires a funding approach which allows for regular review of public health spending requirements in the context of overall health needs, especially given the central role of public health in ensuring the wellbeing of all South Australians.

As noted in our comments about p26, also necessary is consideration of the human resources and associated expertise required for successful implementation of the Plan, and the potential financial benefits of ‘greening’ the health sector, for example through use of renewable energy sources and sustainable procurement practices. Collaboration with non-health sector partners (such as those in the environment

sector) is also essential to address the range of factors affecting public health and necessary responses.

Conclusion

As per our previous submissions, DEA members (with access to DEA's expert [Scientific Committee](#)) are willing to provide input to the Chief Public Health Officer during any further development of the *State Public Health Plan 2019-2024*, including contributions towards the development of indicators for monitoring the health impacts of climate change and associated responses.

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